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Wine

Italy Taking on French Wines by Promoting Home Grown Varietals

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Report Highlights: Italy has decided to take on French wines by promoting home grown varietals -- Vino Novello and Prosecco sparkling wine, in hopes of competing with Beaujolais Nouveau and French Champagne. Italy's aim is to challenge French wines both nationally and internationally by entering promoting Italian wines both in new markets or solidifying their presence in old ones.

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Vino Novello versus Beaujolais Nouveau

"Vino Novello is the Italian answer to what was once a totally French phenomenon, the Beaujolais" Minister of Agriculture Zaia is quoted as saying. Vino Novello, like the French Beaujolais, is a light, fruity red wine which by law must be bottled within a year of the harvest. The fruity flavor of this so-called "new" wine is in part due to the fact that the grape juice is not left to ferment too long with the grape skins, which contain the chemical tannin.

Wine specialists note that one of the main differences between Novello and Beaujolais is that the Italian wine retains some of the carbonation used to accelerate the fermentation process while the French one is traditionally flat.

The tradition of producing the French Beaujolais Nouveau wine began back in the 1950's in France's Burgundy region while the Italian Vino Novello was officially recognized only in 1987. In Italy there are over 246 vineyards producing Novello with a forecast production output for 2008 worth 52.5 million euros. "We believe that the quality of our product is proven by the fact that the making of Novello is not just limited to one region but takes place from north to south in scores of vineyards of different sizes."

Novello traditionally makes its debut during the first week in November, several weeks before the Beaujolais wine that cannot be uncorked until the third Thursday of November. This year Novello will debut on 4 November while Beaujolais on 20 November.

Prosecco versus Champagne

Prosecco is mainly produced in the Veneto region. In 1969 a group of Prosecco producers from 15 villages in Valdobbiadene obtained the DOC designation - Denominazione di origine controllata. The DOC certifies the content, production method and regional origin of the wine. Today, the Italian DOC area cultivates 4,700 hectares, producing 56 million bottles a year.

Wine specialists note that Prosecco is a softer, easier to drink sparkling wine than Champagne, and the good price/quality ratio is certainly an added benefit. However, Zaia's idea of taking on French Champagne is not going to be an easy task. Prosecco producers are hoping to enter new markets, especially the United States and China. Last year's production of 16 million bottles is only a small fraction compared to French Champagne's 150 million bottles.

Of note is the fact that Minister Zaia was born in Conegliano (nearby Valdobbiadene) and is himself a connoisseur of wine and enology. Thanks to Zaia's personal interest in the Prosecco industry, Prosecco growers are pushing to create a new DOC area to regulate all the Prosecco producers that are not in Valdobbiadene region, which will keep its own specific DOC. Zaia plans on petitioning the European Union to reserve the name Prosecco only for the grape grown in Northern Italy, in order for it to be a regional brand and not a generic name.

Italy's DOC Designation

The DOC designation is given to over three hundred Italian wine growing areas. This designation governs such things as area of production, permissible grape varieties, maximum yield of grapes per acre, minimum alcohol content, aging requirement, and such vineyard practices as pruning and trellising. In addition, to be eligible for a DOC designation, wines must pass a taste test and a chemical analysis.